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ABSTRACT

The Delaware Research for Better Schools Rural Assistance Council's (RAC) mission is to develop a rural assistance agenda for the state. The Council stated four objectives: (1) identifying the most pressing needs of Delaware's rural schools and school districts; (2) developing plans, in cooperation with appropriate state organizations, for attending to those needs; (3) outlining an operational agenda for carrying out the plan; and (4) establishing a network of Delaware organizations and associations and enlisting their assistance in carrying out the plan. The Council met with representatives from the rural school systems to identify the pressing needs. Next, a team visited various organizations (both education and noneducation) to gather responses to the identified issues. The RAC then developed a legislative agenda consisting of the following four items: (1) continued State promotion of the Division III funding process, which attempts to equalize current expense monies to school districts; (2) sufficient funding to fully implement the last restrictive environment initiative; (3) a reduction of the number of teacher units needed to qualify for a second principal from 55 to 50; and (4) the implementation of a formula to equalize major capital improvement funding for facilities. Political and business leaders from Delaware presented the RAC's issues at a banquet for over 300 educators, farmers, and small businessmen. Future plans include sponsoring conferences addressing higher order thinking skills, drugs, and technology. (KS)

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"DELAWARE'S RURAL ASSISTANCE COUNCIL PROMOTES THE RURAL AGENDA IN THE FIRST STATE"

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by

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Members of the Delaware Research for Better Schools Rural Assistance Council have planted the seed in the First State. And they have been watching it grow ever since.

The Rural Assistance Council (RAC) was formed in December of 1988 and includes members from the education and non-education communities. Born under the umbrella of the Philadelphia (PA) based Research for Better Schools (RBS), a private, non-profit educational research and development organization funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the RAC has one RBS member, Robert Bhaerman, RBS Rural Project Director.

Two members are non-educators, Jane Mitchell, Master of the Delaware State Grange, and Sherman Stevenson, Executive Vice-President of the Delaware Farm Bureau. Four representatives of the education community round out the seven-person council, Lloyd Harrington, Principal of West Laurel (DEL) Elementary School, John Lynch, President of the Delaware School Boards Association, Dr. Wilmer Wise, State Director, Research and Evaluation, Delaware Department of Public Instruction and Dr. James H. VanSciver, Superintendent of Lake Forest (DEL) School District who serves as Chairperson of the RAC.

Members felt it critical to have representation on the RAC from each of Delaware's three counties, Kent, New Castle and Sussex. They achieved that goal.

Their first task was to develop an extensive networking list of national, regional, and state individuals with whom to share their efforts. These individuals included all of the political and educational entities in Delaware, the media, the National Rural

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Education Association and anyone else identified by members as concerned or interested in rural education and communities in the State. This networking list was activated after each meeting, sharing minutes, concerns and recommendations.

RAC members felt it imperative to create a state-wide awareness of the status of rural education in Delaware if a grass roots movement of support was to be generated. This was the first time in memory that an organization had attempted to mobilize educators and non-educators in an effort to create a unified initiative in support of the smaller and less wealthy school systems.

By March of 1989, RAC members were hammering out a definition of rural education. This was no easy task. In contacting national and regional organizations, the response to the question of "What is a definition of rural education?" was either, "There is none!" or there were so many variations as to lead one to the conslusion that there is, in fact, not one that may be applied uniformly to all states. Committee members thus generated their own and based it on the needs of the people of Delaware.

It reads, "Rural school districts in Delaware are school districts without miles of resort area, pockets of dense population or significant industrial growth. These districts had fewer than 3400 students (as of September 30, 1988) or less than $130,000 full valuation per pupil (1988-89)."

The rural school districts which were then identified out of the 19 in the state were Appoquinimink, Caesar Rodney, Delmar, Lake Forest, Laurel, Milford, Seaford, Smyrna, and Woodbridge.

At the same time, RAC members were generating a mission statement which would set the direction for their efforts. After much discussion, it was decided that the statement would read, "The Delaware Research for Better Schools Rural Assistance Council's mission is to develop a rural assistance agenda for the state. The members represent the interests and concerns of all people in Delaware who have a stake in the improvement of rural education. There are four objectives which have been identified. They are: (1) Identify the most pressing needs of Delaware's rural schools and school districts;

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(2) Develop, in cooperation with appropriate state organizations, plans for attending to those needs; (3) Outline an operational agenda, one that includes suggested resources and responsibilities, for carrying out the plan in Delaware; and (4) Establish a network of Delaware organizations and associations and enlist their assistance in carrying out the plan."

In May of 1989 a meeting was held at the State Grange building during which input was collected from representatives of the identified rural school systems to determine the pressing needs of Delaware's rural schools. Next, a team visited each board of education of the rural school districts, the Delaware School Boards Association, the Delaware Association of School Administrators, the Delaware State Education Association, the State Board of Education, the State Grange and the Delaware Farm Bureau to collect responses to the identified issues. An analysis sheet was developed which contained all groups' responses and distributed to all those organizations which provided input. They were asked to prioritize their needs and recommendations and return the form to the RAC. From this process, the RAC formulated a legislative agenda which represented tens of thousands of Delawareans, those who were represented by the various organizations.

The four legislative items were: (1) Continued State promotion of the Division III funding process which attempts to equalize current expense monies to school districts in Delaware; (2) Sufficient funding to fully implement the least restrictive environment initiative which is gaining momentum in the state; (3) A reduction of the number of teacher units needed to qualify for a second assistant principal from 55 to 50; and (4) The implementation of a formula to equalize major capital improvement funding for facilities. The legislative agenda mirrored that of the Delaware School Boards Association. The RAC members had drafted legislation for the facilities funding to be introduced in Delaware's General Assembly.

A major rallying point for the legislative agenda was held on March 30, 1990 when over 300 educators, farmers and small businessman met at the Delaware Research for

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Better Schools Rural Assistance Council banquet. The affair was a celebration of rural education and living in Delaware. Participants who arrived at the Sheraton Inn in Dover were greeted by a rural atmosphere which turned the banquet hall into a rural farm. Bales of straw, corn shocks, antique farm implements and fresh vegetables and fruit were everywhere. The Delaware Department of Agriculture had adorned the hall with advertisements and displays featuring Delaware produce. Each attendee was given a cowboy hat, a bandana and a cowbell to ring instead of clapping. A scarecrow was part of a backdrop where pictures were taken.

And packets of information regarding the issues relating to rural education and communities was made available for all participants. As people were seated at their tables covered with red and white checkerboard tablecloths, they opened fortune cookies which urged them to "Support Your Del RBS RAC." They heard greatings from U.S. Congressman Thomas Carper and were welcomed by Sherman Stevenson. Delaware State Chamber of Commerce President John Burris, Edgar Dill, Regional Governor of the Ruritan Club, Ann Case, Executive Director of the Delaware School Boards Association, John Hopkins and John Connolly, representing Research for Better Schools, all presnted the issues which were identified as being important by the RAC. Layton Wheeler, of the Delaware Electric Cooperative, spoke of the need for promoting education in Delaware's rural communities. Dr. VanSciver concluded the program by urging the participants to strive to continue the initiative which had been begun. A rural menu was followed by entertainment.

Participants were then included on the RAC networking list. Their pictures were mailed to them within two weeks and served as reinforcement with which to promote the initiatives of the RAC. They became a part of an extensive lobbying effort with which to promote the legislative agenda of the RAC.

But the Delaware RAC is more than a political entity. Future plans include the sposnorship of a conference dealing with higher order thinking skills. Long range plans call for additional conferences, one dealing with drugs, another dealing with

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technology and still another which will deal with the promotion of cooperative relationships between Delaware's rural school systems.

That seed has blossomed into a plant. That plant is beginning to flower. Additional seedlings are beginning to fly with the wind to all corners of the First State. The Delaware Research for Better Schools Rural Assistance Council has begun a garden in Delaware, a garden which appears to be flourishing in very fertile soil.

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